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Federal Subsistence Board News Release

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Federal Public Waters within the Boundaries of the Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge

2015 Kuskokwim Area Salmon Fishery News Release 8

The Refuge Manager has issued seven previous Emergency Special Actions for Federal public waters within and adjacent to Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge). All fishing remains closed to non-Federally qualified users. Chinook Salmon fishing remains closed to all user groups on the Kuskokwim River and all of its salmon tributaries. Federally qualified residents continue to have a limited opportunity to harvest Chinook Salmon with Federal Community Harvest Permits. The scheduled four-inch set gillnet opportunity downstream of the Tuluksak River on the Kuskokwim River and all of its salmon tributaries remains closed. This action opens a 72 hour opportunity on the Kuskokwim River above the Tuluksak River.

Fisheries management below the Refuge boundary at the Kuskokwim River mouth and above the Refuge boundary on the Kuskokwim River at Aniak is under the authority of the State in-season manager. For more information regarding subsistence fishing in these areas, please contact the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) at 907-543-2433.

Emergency Special Action **3KS-08-15** opens an opportunity for Federally qualified residents to harvest non-salmon species using four-inch set gillnets on the Kuskokwim River within the boundaries of Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge upriver of the Tuluksak River. The use of gillnets for the harvest of Chinook Salmon is prohibited except under Federal Community Harvest Permits. The affected area is defined as that portion of the Kuskokwim River upriver of the Tuluksak River to the Refuge boundary at Aniak. (See Figure 7 on-line). The lower boundary of this closure on the Kuskokwim River at Tuluksak River is located at the ADF&G regulatory markers on the main stem of the Kuskokwim approximately half a mile upriver from the confluence of the mouth of the Tuluksak and the Kuskokwim (see Figure 8 on-line). The upper Refuge boundary is a line from the north to the south bank of the Kuskokwim River immediately upriver of Aniak. This boundary line begins at a point on the north bank of the Kuskokwim River at Latitude 61.588463°, Longitude -159.517392 and ends at a point on the south bank of the Kuskokwim River at Latitude 61.574033°, Longitude -159.517396° (see figure 2 on-line).

This closure does not affect the opportunity to harvest Chinook Salmon with the Federal Community Harvest Permits.

In the Kuskokwim River and its salmon tributaries, all species except Chinook Salmon may be targeted by Federally qualified fishers using all legal subsistence gear excluding gillnets. Legal subsistence gear includes dip net, beach seine, fish wheel, or rod and reel. Chinook Salmon incidentally harvested with dip net, beach seine, fish wheel, or rod and reel must be immediately released. There are no gill net restrictions 100 yards upriver of non-salmon tributaries.

Biological Rationale

Due to historically low Chinook Salmon returns over the last several years and the failure to meet escapement goals conservation measures are warranted in 2015. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game estimated the Kuskokwim River drainage-wide Chinook Salmon return at 136,000 fish, which is well below the 25-year annual average return of 243,000. The 2014 subsistence harvest was a historic low with an estimated subsistence harvest of 12,000 Chinook Salmon. The drainage-wide escapement for 2014 was estimated at 124,000 Chinook Salmon and passed the upper end of the escapement goal; however two of the three tributaries failed to meet escapement goals. The State of Alaska drainage-wide escapement goal is 65,000–120,000 Chinook Salmon, and the 2015 return is forecasted to be between 96,000 and 163,000 Chinook Salmon. At the upper end of that range, there would be enough fish to meet escapement goals and provide for a moderate Chinook Salmon subsistence harvest. At the lower end of the projected run, a very limited subsistence harvest could impact the likelihood of achieving escapement goals.

The final magnitude of the 2015 Chinook Salmon run is still very uncertain. Based on observations from the Bethel Test Fishery, it is possible that the 2015 Chinook Salmon run is significantly weaker than the 2014 run. Additional precautionary management measures are warranted until the strength of the return can be fully gauged. Presently, both the Bethel Test Fishery and the tagging project near the Johnson River suggest that a higher abundance of Chinook Salmon may be entering the river. However, a closure below Tuluksak is warranted to protect this group of fish as they begin to move up-river towards the spawning grounds. These fish will be moving above Tuluksak in the following weeks and will require further protection. Additional fishing opportunity will be provided once chum and sockeye salmon significantly outnumber Chinook Salmon at the Bethel Test Fishery.

Federally qualified subsistence users can still harvest fish, except Chinook Salmon, within the Refuge boundary using other legal gear types that allow for selective harvest, including dip net, beach seine, fish wheel, or rod and reel.

A dedicated message line with up-to-date fishing regulations on the federal waters of the Kuskokwim drainage can be reached at 907-543-1037. Additional information pertaining to Federal closures can be obtained at http://www.doi.gov/subsistence/topics/kuskokwim_2015.cfm or by contacting Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge at (907) 543-3151 or at (800) 621-5804.

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